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SIPDIS

NSC STAFF FOR POUNDS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [EG](#) [KPAL](#)

SUBJECT: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS PREVIEW # 4

REF: A. CAIRO 8392

[B](#). CAIRO 8274

[C](#). CAIRO 8112

Classified by ECPO Minister Counselor Michael Corbin for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) On the final day of campaigning before Egypt's three-stage parliamentary elections kick off on November 9, the stage is set for numerous bitterly contested races. A number of members of the cabinet and other key GOE and opposition figures have their seats on the line in this first round. The ruling NDP should easily retain control of the People's Assembly, but the size and character of the next parliament's opposition remains the key issue at stake. The illegal but tolerated Muslim Brotherhood, which is fielding 150 nominally independent candidates, is attracting more attention than Egypt's fractured opposition parties, in spite of a coalition which includes many of them in a "National Front." Meanwhile, Egypt's domestic election monitors won a significant court victory on November 6, affirming their right to access polling stations. On the international front, seven members of the European Parliament will visit Egypt on a fact-finding mission that will coincide with the first round, and six "long-term observers" deployed by the National Democratic Institute have set up shop and will remain until after the process concludes in the first week of December. IRI will send assessors for the second round of the elections, set for November 20. End summary.

Key Candidates Poised at the Starting Line

[1](#)2. (C) The official 20-day campaign for the first round of parliamentary elections, which will be staged November 9 in the provinces of Cairo, Giza, Manofiya, Beni Suef, Minya, New Valley, and Marsa Matrouh, ends on the evening of November 7. Since Egyptian law dictates that a candidate must obtain a clear 51 percent majority to win, many of the races are expected to go to runoffs, which will take place, for the first round, on November 15. Among the key GOE figures whose seats are on the line November 9 are:

-- Minister of Finance Youssef Boutros Ghali (YBG): He is pitted against the veteran opposition figure (and fellow Copt) Mona Makram Ebeid, in the northern Cairo constituency al-Ma'had Al-Fanni. YBG is heavily favored to win.

-- Minister of Housing Ibrahim Soliman: Reputedly one of the most corrupt members of the GOE, Soliman is running in the impoverished district of Gamaliyya. He is expected to easily defeat his opponents, an NDP member running as an independent and an obscure Nasserist.

-- Minister of Military Production Sayyed Mishaal: Another cabinet member with a reputation for particularly excessive corruption, Mishaal's race in Helwan, just south of Cairo, received an important boost when his most serious opponent, Hossam Hassanein, a popular former soccer star, withdrew from the competition on November 6. Interestingly, Mishaal's campaign manager broke the news of Hassanein's withdrawal.

-- Minister of People's Assembly Affairs Kamal El-Shazly: Veteran machine politician Shazly, who is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the longest serving member of parliament, is embroiled in an unusually tight competition in his constituency of Bagour, in Manofiya, against a wealthy Wafd candidate, Mohammed Kamal Mostafa. Shazly, who recently told us an average of 500 constituents per night dined at his table during Ramadan, is still the favorite.

-- Presidential Chief of Staff Zakaria Azmy: One of the most powerful men in Egypt by virtue of his proximity to President Mubarak, Azmy faces no serious competition in his Cairo constituency of Zeitoun.

-- People's Assembly Speaker Fathy Surour: Running in the venerable Cairo district of Sayyeda Zainab, Surour told us he was delighted with a November 6 decision to strike 16000

names from the constituency's voter rolls. The names were reportedly mainly duplicates or names of deceased citizens. Surour is being challenged by former Ayman Nour ally Mursi Al-Shaykh and by Amin Mansour, a second cousin of Kamal Shazly. There has been some speculation in the Egyptian media that Shazly was seeking via his relative to unseat Surour, perhaps clearing the way for his own assumption of the speakership. However, in a November 7 conversation with the Ambassador, Surour was more agitated by Al-Shaykh's campaign, which he alleged was mass producing fraudulent voter identification cards. Surour volunteered to the Ambassador that he was seeking Al-Shaykh's arrest.

13. (SBU) Other important races at stake on November 9 involve key members of Gamal Mubarak's NDP "reform camp:"

-- Steel tycoon Ahmed Ezz, who ran President Mubarak's reelection campaign, is being challenged for his seat in Manofiya by another ally of Gamal's, the wealthy businessman Ibrahim Kamal. Though a prominent NDP member, Kamal is running as an independent.

-- Hossam Badrawi, a long-term Gamal ally who recently lashed out at the NDP for favoring old-school veterans over younger reformers in its nominations, is being challenged for his seat in the downtown Cairo district of Qasr Al-Nil by (independent) Muslim Brotherhood affiliate Gamal Abdel Salam.

Nour's Seat Bitterly Contested

14. (C) One of the most interesting races on November 9 is in the lower middle class Cairo constituency of Bab al-Shariya/Moski:

-- Ayman Nour, the embattled leader of the opposition Ghad Party, is fighting for his political life in a race against the (ostensibly retired) State Security officer Yahya Wahdani.

-- Nour and his supporters have repeatedly claimed that the GOE, through the State Security Service, is employing heavy handed tactics to ensure Nour's defeat, including repeated summons of community leaders, and other residents suspected of supporting Nour, to police stations to be warned of "consequences" and unspecified retaliation if Wahdani loses.

-- Nour's wife and political adviser Gameela Ismail told poloff on November 6 that she was confident neighborhood constituents would remain steadfast in their support in spite of alleged acts of intimidation, but worried that Wahdani, with GOE cooperation, would be able to doctor the results.

-- Ismail said she had been consulting with domestic monitoring groups to encourage maximum attention to the counting and tabulation process in the district.

MB - The Force to Watch

15. (SBU) As discussed reftel, one of the most important stories of this parliamentary elections season has been the aggressive full-court press made by nominally independent candidates affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Deputy Supreme Guide Mahmoud Habib readily admitted in an interview published November 3 that the group has never had as much space to operate and campaign as it has in the fall of 2005. The MB's "Islam is the Solution" slogan is ubiquitous in banners strung all across Cairo and other districts, prompting bitter attacks in the press and on TV by veteran MB critics like Rif'at Said, leader of the leftist Tagammu' Party. Said blamed the MB's use of this slogan, and its advocacy of imposing Shari'a law, for creating the environment in which Islamist terrorism plagued Egypt during the 1990s.

16. (C) Elsewhere in the Egyptian political scene, attitudes toward the MB appear to be evolving. The Egyptian press took note of veteran NDP figure Kamal El-Shazly's comment at an October 30 news conference that the MB was "a political force that cannot be ignored." GOE rhetoric toward the MB has more typically insinuated that the group aimed to present a legitimate facade to mask an extremist, or even terrorist, agenda. However, in a November 7 meeting with the Ambassador, People's Assembly Speaker Fathy Surour asserted that he went out of his way to treat the 15 members of the outgoing parliament affiliated with the MB with equanimity and respect, asserting that this approach yielded more positive results than ostracism and open hostility. Surour predicted the MB would double its current representation in the next parliament, with approximately 35 seats.

17. (SBU) In his November 3 interview, Deputy Supreme Guide

Habib evinced confidence both in the MB's near-term political prospects and in its fundamental strengths as an organization. Habib predicted the MB, which is fielding 150 candidates for the 444 elected seats of the People's Assembly, would win at least 50 of them. Contrasting his group with the ruling NDP, Habib asserted that the MB was enriched with volunteers who believe in their cause. While the NDP has to pay people for every service they provide, MB supporters willingly donated their time and resources for the sake of their group. In a related story circulated on November 7, Sheikh Abdallah Al-Khatib, a member of the MB's Guidance Bureau, issued a fatwa forbidding the buying and selling of votes.

A Step Forward for Domestic Monitors

18. (SBU) In a victory for domestic observers, a Cairo administrative court ruled on November 7 that independent civil society organizations can monitor the parliamentary elections and have access to polling stations and need not coordinate in advance with the government-appointed National Council for Human Rights, which has been engaged in its own efforts to train and deploy election monitors. Although the Chairman of the Parliamentary Elections Commission, Justice Minister Aboul Leil, had already acknowledged in principle the right of civil society groups to monitor the elections (ref C) the exact modalities of this monitoring have remained uncertain.

19. (SBU) The court ruling was prompted by a lawsuit filed by a coalition of Egyptian NGOs who suspected that the GOE, through the electoral commission, would use the credentialing process to restrict the access of independent domestic monitors. Although the court ruling adds weight and momentum to the activities of domestic monitors, we anticipate that access and freedom of activity for domestic monitors will remain contentious and will be interpreted differently at different locales.

International "Observers"

10. (SBU) Meanwhile, we learned on November 7 that seven members of the European Parliament will arrive in Cairo for a November 8-11 "fact-finding mission" in connection with the first round of the parliamentary elections. In a separate development, NDI's six "long term observers" (LTOs) have also arrived in Cairo and are preparing for their month-long assessment of the Egyptian parliamentary election process. The NDI LTOs plan to coordinate closely with the domestic observers. IRI will also be sending an assessment team that will focus on the second round of elections, set to begin on November 20.

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